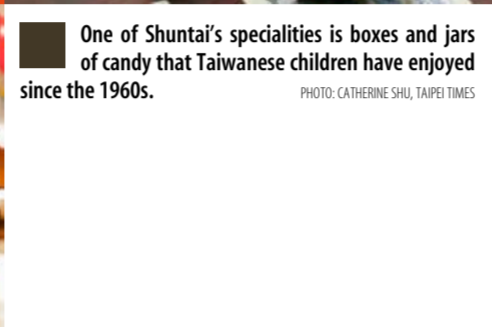




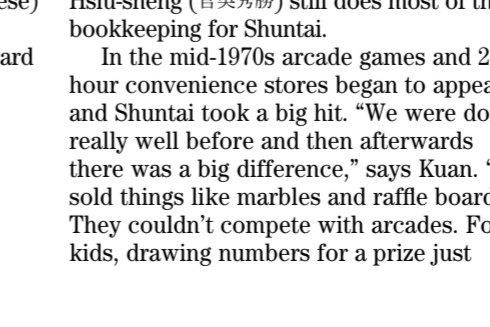
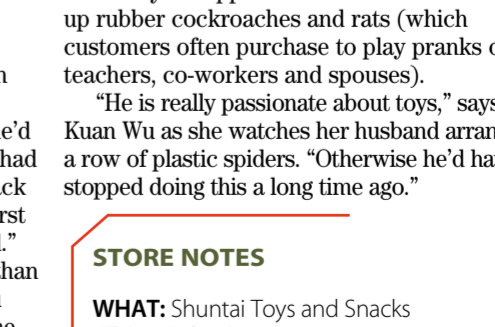
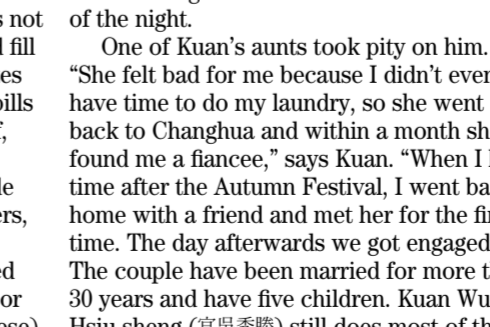
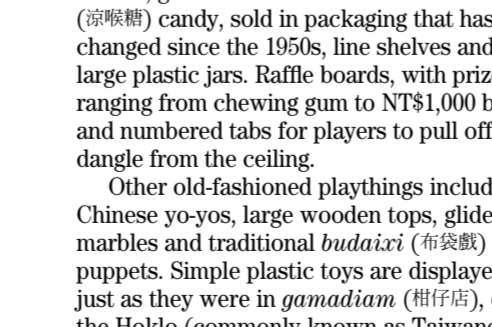
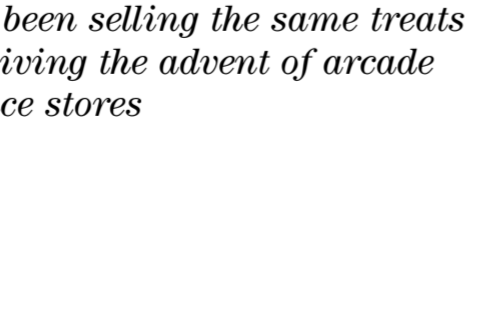
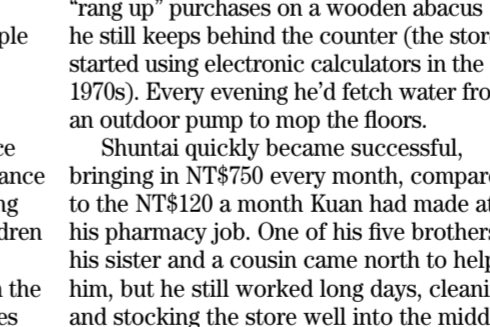
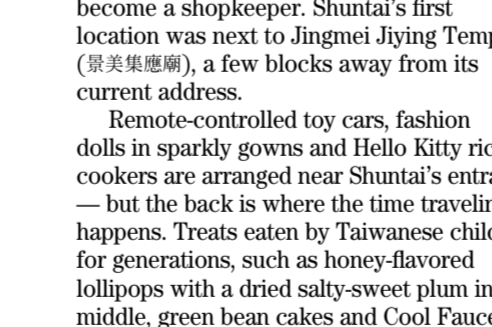
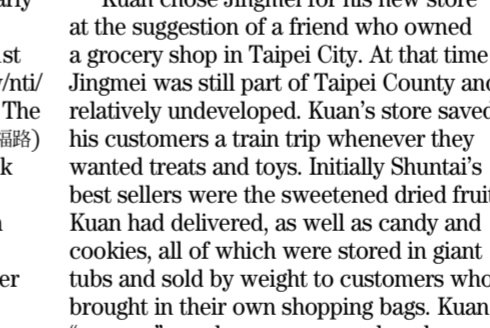
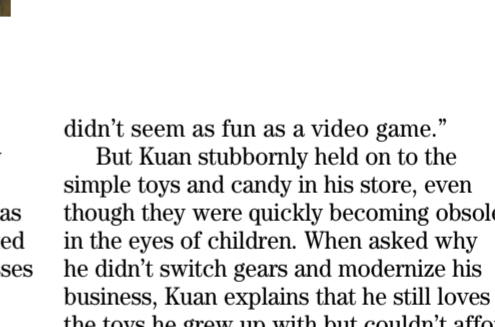
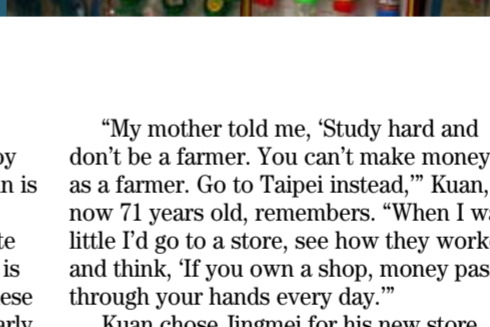
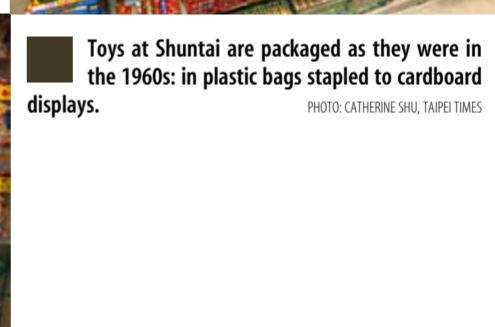
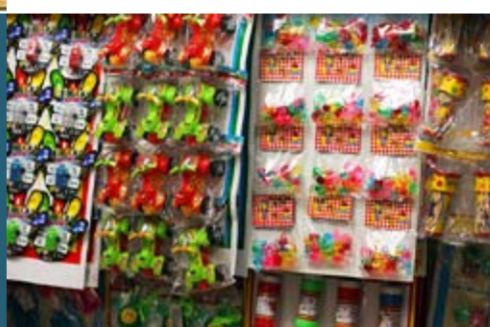
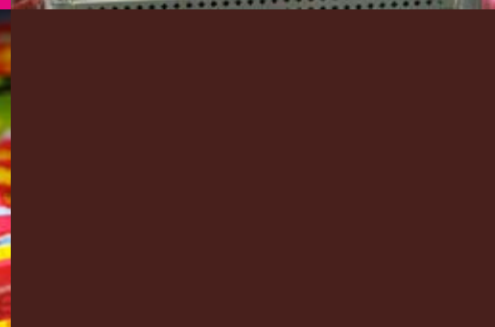
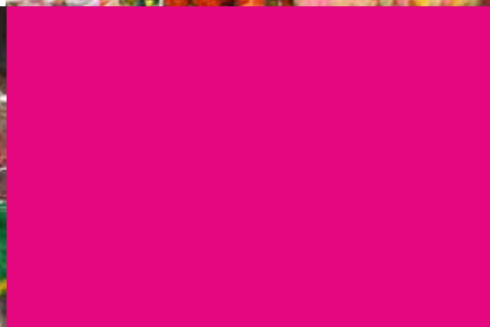
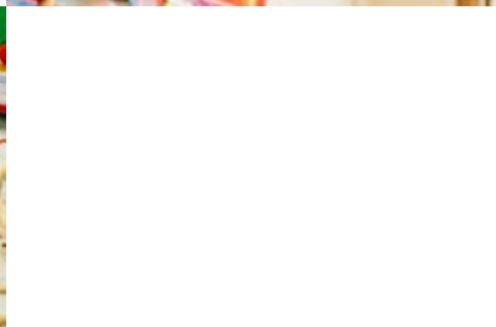
Kuan Ta-hsing and his wife Kuan Wu Hsiu-sheng have run Shuntai for more than 40 years.
PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES



A vintage wind-up boy on a bike from Shuntai owner Guan Tahsing's collection stands next to a new toy frog.
PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES



One of Shuntai's specialties is boxes and jars of candy that Taiwanese children have enjoyed since the 1960s.
PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES



Like a kid in a time machine

Shuntai Toys and Snacks has been selling the same treats for nearly half a century, surviving the advent of arcade games and 24-hour convenience stores

BY CATHERINE SHU
STAFF REPORTER

Shuntai Toys and Snacks (順泰玩具食品行) might look like an ordinary toy store from the outside — but within is a haven for nostalgia.

With simple metal shelves and concrete floors, Shuntai is no-frills — but the shop is packed with snacks and toys that Taiwanese children have enjoyed since it opened nearly half a century ago. Owner Kuan Ta-hsing (官大興) has taken his business into the 21st century with a Web site (toy.5buy.com.tw/nti/front/bin/home.phtml) and online orders. The small storefront on Roosevelt Road (羅斯福路) in Jingmei (景美), however, would not look out of place in 1960s Taiwan.

Before opening Shuntai in 1964, Kuan worked in a pharmacy and delivered preserved fruit and other snacks to corner stores. That second job inspired him to become a shopkeeper. Shuntai's first location was next to Jingmei Jiying Temple (景美集應廟), a few blocks away from its current address.

Remote-controlled toy cars, fashion dolls in sparkly gowns and Hello Kitty rice cookers are arranged near Shuntai's entrance — but the back is where the time traveling happens. Treats eaten by Taiwanese children for generations, such as honey-flavored lollipops with a dried salty-sweet plum in the middle, green bean cakes and Cool Fruits (涼喉糖) candy, sold in packaging that has not changed since the 1950s, line shelves and fill large plastic jars. Raffle boards, with prizes ranging from chewing gum to NT\$1,000 bills and numbered tabs for players to pull off, dangle from the ceiling.

Other old-fashioned playthings include Chinese yo-yos, large wooden tops, gliders, marbles and traditional *budaxi* (布袋戲) puppets. Simple plastic toys are displayed just as they were in *gamadiam* (柑仔店), or the Hoklo (commonly known as Taiwanese) word for old-fashioned corner stores: stapled in plastic bags onto large cardboard display cards for little hands to pull off. Despite their retro charm, these trinkets now include cell phone replicas in neon colors and Pokemon finger puppets.

Kuan says it was his dream to own a business while growing up on a farm in Changhua.

"My mother told me, 'Study hard and don't be a farmer. You can't make money as a farmer. Go to Taipei instead,'" Kuan, now 71 years old, remembers. "When I was little I'd go to a store, see how they worked and think, 'If you own a shop, money passes through your hands every day.'"

Kuan chose Jingmei for his new store at the suggestion of a friend who owned a grocery shop in Taipei City. At that time Jingmei was still part of Taipei County and relatively undeveloped. Kuan's store saved his customers a train trip whenever they wanted treats and toys. Initially Shuntai's best sellers were the sweetened dried fruit Kuan had delivered, as well as candy and cookies, all of which were stored in giant tubs and sold by weight to customers who brought in their own shopping bags. Kuan "rang up" purchases on a wooden abacus he still keeps behind the counter (the store started using electronic calculators in the 1970s). Every evening he'd fetch water from an outdoor pump to mop the floors.

Shuntai quickly became successful, bringing in NT\$750 every month, compared to the NT\$120 a month Kuan had made at his pharmacy job. One of his five brothers, his sister and a cousin came north to help him, but he still worked long days, cleaning and stocking the store well into the middle of the night.

One of Kuan's aunts took pity on him. "She felt bad for me because I didn't even have time to do my laundry, so she went back to Changhua and within a month she'd found me a fiancée," says Kuan. "When I had time after the Autumn Festival, I went back home with a friend and met her for the first time. The day afterwards we got engaged." The couple have been married for more than 30 years and have five children. Kuan Wu Hsiu-sheng (官吳秀勝) still does most of the bookkeeping for Shuntai.

In the mid-1970s arcade games and 24-hour convenience stores began to appear and Shuntai took a big hit. "We were doing really well before and then afterwards there was a big difference," says Kuan. "We sold things like marbles and raffle boards. They couldn't compete with arcades. For kids, drawing numbers for a prize just

didn't seem as fun as a video game."

But Kuan stubbornly held on to the simple toys and candy in his store, even though they were quickly becoming obsolete in the eyes of children. When asked why he didn't switch gears and modernize his business, Kuan explains that he still loves the toys he grew up with but couldn't afford as a youngster. "I loved playing with marbles and *guanpai* [圓牌, round playing cards with cartoon characters], but we couldn't buy them," says Kuan. He made his own playthings, folding paper "footballs" to flip through goals placed on a table and making up different games for rubber bands.

In the mid-1990s, however, Shuntai's merchandise suddenly went from "old-fashioned" to "retro." A magazine feature led to a flurry of newspaper articles and TV spots. Publications and bloggers still visit Shuntai to take photos and indulge in nostalgia.

"Sometimes we have old customers who bring in their own kids. And since we've been around for a while, we have customers who bring in their grandchildren," says Kuan.

Kuan still happily demonstrates old-time toys for customers, flipping over a pile of *guanpai*, winding up tin toys, spinning wooden tops, showing the right way to make off with your opponent's marbles and lining up rubber cockroaches and rats (which customers often purchase to play pranks on teachers, co-workers and spouses).

"He is really passionate about toys," says Kuan Wu as she watches her husband arrange a row of plastic spiders. "Otherwise he'd have stopped doing this a long time ago."

STORE NOTES

WHAT: Shuntai Toys and Snacks (順泰玩具食品行)
WHERE: 453, Roosevelt Rd Sec 6, Taipei City (台北市羅斯福路六段453號) near Jingmei MRT Station's (景美捷運站) exit No. 1. Tel: (02) 2931-4616
OPEN: 9am to 10pm
ON THE NET: toy.5buy.com.tw/nti/front/bin/home.phtml